

VZCZCXRO1300
RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHSK #0028/01 0131149
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 131149Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3604
INFO RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0823
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000028

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/12/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO FEARS WEAK OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Political analyst Valeriy Karbalevich explained that Lukashenko fears the opposition, even though the opposition poses no real threat in the March elections. Lukashenko, perhaps believing his regime's own propaganda, seemingly has not decided whether to allow his two main opposition rivals, 10 candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and social-democrat Aleksandr Kozulin, to make it onto the ballot. Karbalevich thinks Lukashenko will either allow both to run, to split the opposition vote, or will only register the weaker candidate, Milinkevich. Despite initial promise, Karbalevich argued that Milinkevich's campaign team has failed so far to promote his candidacy. End summary.

No Threat, No Airtime

12. (C) Speaking with Econoff on January 12, independent political analysts Valeriy Karbalevich speculated that Lukashenko is afraid of the opposition's single candidate, even though Lukashenko's ratings remain high and the opposition poses no real threat. He added the observation that so far state media has barely covered the pre-election campaign. Only on January 11, he claimed, did state television air the first small report on elections. Karbalevich believes Lukashenko wants to avoid giving the opposition candidates any airtime, even if negative, as that would raise name recognition. Continuing the information vacuum means voters only know Lukashenko.

Only Four Possible Candidates

13. (C) Karbalevich said only five of the seven current candidates were likely to collect the needed 100,000 signatures. He said Lukashenko and Liberal-Democrat Sergey Gaidukevich, a regime stooge, would certainly be registered as candidates. Self-exiled nationalist Zenon Paznyak might collect enough signatures, but will never be registered. Paznyak has promised to return to Belarus if he is registered as a candidate. Karbalevich believes that return would generate much press, especially in Russia, which Lukashenko does not want to happen.

14. (C) The other two likely to collect enough signatures are 10 candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, and Social-Democrat Aleksandr Kozulin. Karbalevich believed Lukashenko and the PA have not yet decided whether to register these two. He thinks their decision would depend on their popularity at the end of January. Karbalevich argued the GOB might register both so as to split the opposition vote, or they might choose

to register only the weaker of the two. Somewhat surprisingly, he claimed Milinkevich is the weaker candidate. Milinkevich has placed himself as the opposition's candidate, which Karbalevich claimed would limit his maximum popular support to under 30%. Kozulin, on the other hand, has worked in the GOB and can appeal to both the opposition and the nomenclature. This makes him the greater threat to Lukashenko.

Opposition Campaign Very Weak

15. (C) Karbalevich was very critical of Milinkevich's efforts. He said Milinkevich's campaign team "went to sleep" for three months after Milinkevich was chosen as a candidate and were caught off-guard when Lukashenko announced early elections. With elections two months away, Milinkevich still does not have a message, a symbol, slogan or emblem. Therefore his current travel around Belarus is useless, as he does not leave voters with anything to talk about.

Explaining Lukashenko's Fear

16. (C) Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Karbalevich claimed Lukashenko fears what the opposition, backed by the West and potentially Russia, can do in the elections. He said Lukashenko has fallen victim to his own propaganda. In December, to support amendments to the criminal code, the BKGB gave each MP an analysis that described multiple highly fantastical western conspiracies aimed at Belarus. Karbalevich maintained the BKGB, possibly in their bureaucratic efforts to gain more resources and prestige,

MINSK 00000028 002 OF 002

routinely inflate the external threat in briefings to Lukashenko. Lukashenko therefore reacts in a manner completely disproportionate to the threat, such as having hundreds of riot police on hand to block 30 protestors.
Krol